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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YAOUNDE 000445

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TAGS: [CM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KCOR](#) [PINR](#)
SUBJECT: CAMEROON: BIYA ON ELECTIONS AND WAR AGAINST
CORRUPTION

REF: A. YAOUNDE 174

[1](#)B. 06 YAOUNDE 1501

Classified By: Ambassador Niels Marquardt for reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: President Biya claims he is still hard at work against corruption, and that he will fire and arrest some of his most corrupt ministers (and his incompetent transport minister) before election day. Finding lieutenants who are both clean and competent seems to be a huge challenge, however. Biya confirmed that he will convoke the electorate for July 22 elections and also seemed interested in trying something new (like a press conference) to increase lagging voter registrations. Biya is supportive of major U.S. investments in Cameroon, like Hydromine's bauxite project and the "le Car" urban transit scheme. He hopes a U.S. firm will re-bid on taking over Camair once a new, transparent tender is launched. Cameroon will take over the CEMAC presidency and Biya says he supports Obiang's desire for reforms and a "redistribution of the CEMAC/BEAC cards." On Darfur, Biya remains supportive of U.S. objectives and policy but baffled by what makes Bashir tick. End summary.

Fight against corruption still on

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[1](#)2. (C) I met President Biya, at my request, on April 9 for 90 minutes. After opening pleasantries about my nomination to Madagascar and the confirmation process ahead for me and my successor here (Biya seemed surprised that our constitution requires Senate confirmation), Biya turned to corruption. He expressed rising frustration with the legal actions against senior officials accused of embezzlement and detailed his meetings with the Supreme Court President and Justice Minister aimed at speeding up the process. He said he was outraged to see certain accused officials, such as former Douala Mayor Etonde, "walking around as if nothing has happened." He said he was considering legal changes that would make justice against the corrupt more swift.

[1](#)3. (C) Concerning Finance Minister Abah Abah, he agreed that Abah has no business representing Cameroon before the World Bank, IMF, or USG, given his reputation for corruption. Biya said that Abah's misdeeds continue, then asked what the

USG dossier on Abah must look like. I said negative information about Abah's involvement in corruption was easily available here, and noted that no USG decision on him had been taken since his visa application was withdrawn. Biya said that he will have to dismiss Abah "even before the elections," and mentioned two other ministers - Health Minister Oluenguena Awono and Public Works Secretary of State Abono - as likely to go too - "perhaps as well as others." When I asked, he reconfirmed his intention to reshuffle the cabinet before the elections, contrary to his earlier assertion that he would wait until afterwards. He lamented the fact that he only asks for two qualities in ministers - integrity and competence - but often must choose between the two. Discussing possible replacements for Abah, he mentioned Deputy Budget Minister Essimi Menyi and ALUCAM Director General Titi Manyaka - indicating that he has not yet decided whom to name to this key post. He said that Deputy Finance Minister Njankouo, whom he is sending to the IMF/WB meetings instead of Abah, is also under a cloud and probably not suitable. (Biya's comments on CONAC, the new anti-corruption commission, are reported septel.)

Elections to take place in July

14. (C) Turning to elections, Biya expressed interest in hearing what the U.S. and other donors have been doing to promote voter registration. Biya said that "it is not normal in a country of our size to have only four million registered voters. I want to know why Cameroonians are not registering." After giving him a t-shirt and an example of flyers we are financing (with ESF funds) to encourage registration, I gave him some blunt answers to his question: apathy, lack of faith in those running the election (Interior

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Ministry officials), procrastination, a history of bad elections, lack of information, and confusion about whose role it is to encourage registration. I said western diplomats think it's a collective responsibility among civil society, parties, and the government, while some in the GRC think it belongs to political parties alone. I encouraged him to consider something out of the ordinary this week to appeal to the electorate before it's too late. Biya confirmed that he plans to convoke the electorate on or about April 21, for elections to take place July 22, 90 days later. Suggesting that he needed to do something unusual to attract attention, I encouraged a Presidential press conference (with questions limited to this election); he seemed very favorable and said he would meet with Interior Minister Marafa today to discuss the idea. He said he clearly understands that successful elections are critical here, for a range of reasons.

Bilateral relations and U.S. investments

15. (C) I also briefed Biya on our plans for celebrating this year the 50th anniversary of the American diplomatic presence in Cameroon this year. I gave him copies of selected photos to be included in the photo exhibition to be opened on July 4, and briefed him on the commissioning of a JFK bust to be placed permanently in Avenue Kennedy in downtown Yaounde. I also told him I expect Peace Corps Director Ron Tschetter to come in June for the unveiling, and asked that Biya receive him at that time. He agreed to do so.

16. (C) Regarding major U.S. investments, I briefed Biya on recent difficulties faced by the organizers of the Hydromine bauxite project (now meeting with Industry Minister Charles Sale in Dubai, after three unnecessary postponements) and the "Le Bus/Le Car" transport project (victims of a range of unfulfilled GRC promises). Biya took my point that American investors expect results, not process, when they invest, and agreed with my request that major projects like these two should receive particular treatment directly from the

Presidency. Biya apologized for the slowness and inefficiency of his bureaucracy, and also said he would fire Transport Minister Daikole, for incompetence and insobriety. He also agreed to receive the President of Noble Energy when he visits Cameroon next week to seek an extension of Noble's offshore drilling license in promising acreage directly adjacent their block in EG waters.

Camair and CEMAC

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¶7. (C) Biya then raised two points of his own. First, he noted that the proposed privatization of CAMAIR by SN Brussels had been terminated. He said a new tender will be issued, and asked whether any American company would be interested. I said I thought so, pointing to the Valiant/United consortium that had bid on the first tender, but I stressed that the entire process of re-opening the bidding must be transparent and in conformity with international norms. Biya said he understood and that it would be so.

¶8. (C) Second, Biya raised the recent visit to Yaounde of EG President Obiang and related it to the aviation sector. He said that Obiang wants Cameroon and EG to jointly organize a "CEMAC airline." Biya said he is skeptical and would prefer a national airline. He then noted that Gabon is about to re-launch a national airline with Royal Air Maroc. Chadian President Deby, he said, also had approached him to do a bi-national airline to serve CEMAC. He seemed to be testing his hypothesis favoring a national over a regional carrier; I simply noted that Cameroon has a large domestic market that needs to be served, and urgently.

¶9. (C) This segued into a discussion of CEMAC reforms. He said that the proposed March summit in Ndjamena had been postponed at the very last minute when he got a call from Deby giving the excuse that Bongo's wife was ill and neither

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he nor Sassou could come. His team, he said, was already in Ndjamena. He said the reasons behind Bongo and Sassou's apparent reluctance were not clear, other than their fear of losing power and prestige if Obiang gets his wish for more positions within the CEMAC and BEAC structures. He said he agrees with Obiang on the need for reform, remains committed to regional integration, and is sympathetic, given that "half to three-quarters of BEAC reserves belong to EG," that EG should have more influence. Biya said that it is now Cameroon's turn to take the CEMAC Presidency from Chad, and indicated an eagerness to move ahead once Bongo/Sassou's concerns are better understood. With respect to EG, he expressed a lot of respect for the "hard-working" Obiang, but lamented the poor treatment of Cameroonians by the GREG.

Africa tour d'horizon

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¶10. (C) Before I left, Biya undertook a short tour d'horizon of African issues. He said he thinks Sarkozy will win, but expects little change in French politics toward Africa. On Nigeria, he took my briefing on preparations for the upcoming Nigerian elections, expressing an understandable hope that any problems there don't spill over their 1,000-mile common border. I briefed him on Deputy Secretary Negroponte's trip to Africa this week, stressing the milestone of a free and fair election in Mauritania and the unsolved problem of Darfur that will also bring him to Chad, Sudan, and Libya. Biya said he continues to support the US position on bringing in the UN and said that a stop in Libya is a good idea as Khaddafi seems to have influence over Bashir. Expressing bafflement at Bashir's behavior, Biya also related (again) his February conversation with Chinese President Hu in which he noted the negative spillover effects of Darfur on Cameroon and asked the Chinese to put pressure on Khartoum. Overall, he promised Cameroon's continuing

support for "stopping the genocide in Darfur." With respect to Iraq and the Middle East, Biya reiterated Cameroon's support and admiration for President Bush's efforts to resolve a very difficult situation.

¶11. (C) Comment: Regarding corruption, I once again left Biya's office convinced that he sincerely wants to dismantle a system that largely was created on his watch. I did not leave today any more convinced, however, that he will actually be able to do so. The networks are so deeply rooted and insidious that he is obviously frustrated as he tries to find anyone not tainted by it who is also competent to help run his government. Regarding the elections registration challenge, we will know within days whether Biya decided to do anything unusual to get out the vote. A massive turnout is not intuitively beneficial for the status quo or for the interests of the CPDM. However, to end this comment on a hopeful note, if he does in fact fire and arrest some of his most notorious ministers before the election, he and his party will probably benefit at the polls.

MARQUARDT